

11/26/24, 9:29 AM

Staffing Crisis at Bucks County Prison Disrupts Overnight Inmate Intake – DV Journal

NEWS [Politics \(https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/category/politics/\)](https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/category/politics/)**Staffing Crisis at Bucks County Prison Disrupts Overnight Inmate Intake**Posted to [Politics \(https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/category/politics/\)](https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/category/politics/) September 11, 2023 by [Todd Shepherd \(https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/author/toddsherperdbroadlib/\)](https://delawarevalleyjournal.com/author/toddsherperdbroadlib/)*This article first appeared in Broad + Liberty. (https://broadandliberty.com/2023/09/07/staffing-crisis-at-bucks-county-prison-disrupts-overnight-inmate-intake/)*A staffing crisis at the Bucks County Correctional Facility has become profound enough in recent weeks that personnel have on one occasion closed the intake process for new inmates on an overnight shift, and have considered it on at least one other occasion, according to government emails obtained by *Broad + Liberty* as well as details provided by a county official.

The BCCF intake desk was closed "August 19 into the morning of August 20 because of a large number of medical transfers which required eight officers to be relocated to off-campus watches," Bucks County spokesman James O'Malley said. "An additional two officers were on constant watch unable to perform intake duties. We have no awareness of anyone unable to be processed through intake during that period of time."

*Broad + Liberty* is characterizing that event as a closure, although O'Malley did not necessarily agree, saying, "even with their staffing challenges that night, the jail actually did manage to book an inmate who was brought in shortly after 1 a.m." on the morning of the 20th."

On Aug. 30, an email (<https://broadandliberty.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BCCF-screenshot-1.png>) was circulated widely among county employees which said, "For tonight, between 10 PM – 5 AM – the Reception desk at the Jail is closed for intake due to significant staffing shortages. No new commitments can come to the BCP during the overnight hours – high profile issues should be directed to the Lt. on duty @ [redacted phone number]."

Then on August 31, an email from Robert Pollock, an administrator with Bucks County courts, further set the scene:

"Yesterday Director Kratz from BCCF contacted me to inform me about a critical staffing shortage they have been experiencing at the prison," the email (<https://broadandliberty.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/BCCF-screenshot-2.png>) from Pollock begins. "Approx one week ago they had to close reception from [11 p.m.] to [5 a.m.] because they did not have the minimum number of staff to safely run the prison. This meant they could not take any new commits during that time. While it did not affect the District courts, it did affect the constables and police."

The proposed closure of the intake desk on Aug. 30 did not happen, O'Malley said.

The two emails above were provided anonymously to *Broad + Liberty*.

When contacted for comment, the county **provided a follow-up email** (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/23940122-re-urgent-staffing-issue-tonight-bucks-county-jail>), not originally in *Broad + Liberty's* possession which showed the situation the night of the 30th was defused.

"Although there may be some delays in getting prisoners into reception depending on the volume, medical emergencies, and any additional call outs, we will be able to keep reception running through the night," said the email from David Kratz, director of the county's department of corrections. "Please be patient as things will likely be running slowly at times," Kratz said in an email about six hours after Pollock's.

O'Malley pointed out that a new set of recruits were installed last week.

"The bottom line is this: safety is always the primary consideration in the jail – both for inmates and staff. The averted intake pause [Aug. 30 – 31] was part of the jail's internal protocols designed to ensure safety is maintained," O'Malley said.

"On Aug. 31, a new class of 14 corrections officers had just graduated from the jail's seven-week training program, with 11 cadets immediately starting work. An additional 26 candidates have accepted contingent offers," O'Malley said while also adding, "we still believe we have the best-run county correctional facility in the Commonwealth."

The county did not fully address *Broad + Liberty's* original inquiry into the matter when we asked if the BCCF intake desk had been shut down at any point in the last two months. Only when *B+L* followed up did the county offer the information that the intake desk had essentially been closed the night of Aug. 19 into the morning of the 20th.

The disruptions caused by the staffing levels coincide with a **months-long debate** (<https://broadandliberty.com/2023/08/25/dispute-lingers-over-support-for-new-bucks-county-sheriffs-deputies/>) over how Bucks County would fund eight new sheriff's deputies that Republican Sheriff Fred Harman requested in November of last year.

The two Democrat incumbents on the three-person board of the county commissioners, Diane Ellis-Marseglia and Bob Harvie, originally voted against adding the eight deputies, but in the following months have championed the fact that they funded the positions. Sheriff Harman has **disputed** (<https://broadandliberty.com/2023/08/25/dispute-lingers-over-support-for-new-bucks-county-sheriffs-deputies/>) that account, saying the funding was delayed until media began to ask if the funding had been made available. (Deputies do not staff the BCCF, it should be noted.)



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Prisons and jails all across the country have struggled with staffing issues over the past decade at least, but the situation became exacerbated by the 2020 pandemic. In a 2022 op-ed, the president of the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association described a dire situation at state-run facilities. "The staffing crisis in our state prisons has evolved into the single biggest problem that the Department of Corrections faces," [wrote](https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/pennsylvania-prison-correction-officer-shortage-20220417.html) (https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/pennsylvania-prison-correction-officer-shortage-20220417.html). John Eckenrode at the time. "In June, the Pennsylvania State Corrections Officers Association began gathering staffing numbers, at which point we needed to fill 399 positions. Late last year, our staff shortages skyrocketed to 707. Even though the pandemic has subsided, we are still short 690 staff members." News of the staffing shortage in Bucks also lands as tensions have been high in Philadelphia's collar counties because of a dangerous inmate who escaped the Chester County prison last week and has still not been caught. As the manhunt has continued, the matter has begun to earn national media attention, including from the [New York Times](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/us/philadelphia-fugitive-manhunt-danelo-cavalcante.html) (https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/us/philadelphia-fugitive-manhunt-danelo-cavalcante.html). An [article](https://enewspaper.dailylocal.com/infinity/article_popover_share.aspx?guid=a5621d27-5ea9-4a00-b0a1-d3088a5406b5) (https://enewspaper.dailylocal.com/infinity/article\_popover\_share.aspx?guid=a5621d27-5ea9-4a00-b0a1-d3088a5406b5) from June in Chester County also noted that the sheriff's office there is so short of deputies that some "individual courtrooms that normally would see at least one deputy assigned there to provide security and prisoner transport arrangements were left unmanned for the most part." Shortages of correctional officers also plagued the management handover in Delaware County from private control to government-run in 2022, an [article from WHYV notes](https://why.org/articles/just-weeks-away-hiring-staff-remains-a-critical-need-as-delco-prepares-to-takeover-county-prison/) (https://why.org/articles/just-weeks-away-hiring-staff-remains-a-critical-need-as-delco-prepares-to-takeover-county-prison/). "As of March 16, [2022], just 52% of current correctional officers had offer letters in process and just 38% of that group have already signed their offer letters," as the management handover was just weeks away. In the months that followed, the county [stopped reporting its staffing levels](https://broadandliberty.com/2022/05/10/now-under-government-management-delco-prison-backtracks-on-transparency-by-making-staffing-levels-secret/) (https://broadandliberty.com/2022/05/10/now-under-government-management-delco-prison-backtracks-on-transparency-by-making-staffing-levels-secret/), which had previously been a staple of the monthly reports from the private management group, GEO. The county has also had to extend contracts with private companies that have helped with recruitment for staffing its prison, even as the county had been doling out pay raises for correctional officers, as noted in a [report](https://broadandliberty.com/2022/08/04/delco-council-extends-prison-recruiting-contract-as-staffing-issues-persist/) (https://broadandliberty.com/2022/08/04/delco-council-extends-prison-recruiting-contract-as-staffing-issues-persist/) from *Broad + Liberty* in August 2022.

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